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AUTHOR Burnett, Gary
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ABSTRACT

The New York City Citizens' Commission on Planning for Enrollment Growth submitted a report on overcrowding in New York City schools that may serve as a guide to other cities striving to provide an effective education for ever-increasing numbers of students. Research on the impact of school overcrowding has been inconclusive, but there is some evidence that, especially in schools with a high proportion of students living in poverty, overcrowding can have adverse impacts on learning. It is unquestionable that it has a direct, and often severe, impact on the logistics of the school day. In cases where increases in school enrollment are expected to continue, the only guaranteed long-term means of relieving overcrowding is the expensive and time-consuming process of building new schools or of renovating and adding to existing schools. In cases where increases in enrollment may be temporary or where stop-gap measures are needed while new schools are being built, there are a number of short-term solutions. These strategies, in general, fall into two categories: (1) finding new space, whether through leasing, collaborative arrangements, relocating administrative space, or the district-wide redistribution of space, and (2) using time to use existing space more fully; extended-day and year-round programs are central to this effort. Adequate space for learning must be recognized as a fundamental educational necessity. (SLD)

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Gary Burnett

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OVERCROWDING IN URBAN SCHOOLS

In January 1995, the Citizens' Commission on Planning for Enrollment Growth submitted a report, *Bursting at the Seams*, to the Chancellor of the New York City Board of Education, Ramon C. Cortines. In its report, the Commission, comprised of educators and policy-makers specifically convened by the Chancellor to study the rapid and ongoing growth of student enrollment, outlined a series of proposals to offset the resultant serious overcrowding in New York City schools.

Because of a dramatic increase in immigration, the New York City schools are perhaps the hardest hit by overcrowding among urban schools in the United States; the city as a whole faces a projected enrollment of well over one million students by the year 2002. Still, the conditions that led to the formation of the Citizens' Commission are not unique to New York; particularly in the inner-cities, where space for new construction is at a premium and where, in any case, funding for such construction is improbable, many school systems simply do not have the room to grow in order to accommodate increasing numbers of students. As a result, students elsewhere, like their counterparts in New York, find themselves trying to learn while jammed into spaces never intended as classrooms, such as libraries, gymnasiums, laboratories, lunchrooms, and even closets.

Thus, although the proposals of the Commission were developed in response to a set of conditions specific to New York, they may be used as guidelines for other cities striving to provide an effective education in the face of ever-increasing numbers of new students being taught in limited classroom spaces.

The Impact of School Overcrowding

Research on the impact of school overcrowding on student achievement has, surprisingly, been inconclusive, in part because of a dearth of studies tracking the progress of students in overcrowded schools over time. Still, there is some evidence, particularly in schools with a high proportion of students living in poverty, that overcrowding can have a dire impact on learning. A study carried out as part of the Commission's work found, in fact, that students in such schools scored significantly lower on both mathematics and reading exams than did similar students in underutilized schools. In addition, when asked, students and teachers in overcrowded schools agreed that overcrowding negatively affected both classroom activities and instructional techniques. Crowded classroom conditions not only make it difficult for students to concentrate on their lessons, but inevitably limit the amount of time teachers can spend on innovative teaching methods such as cooperative learning and group work—or, indeed on teaching anything beyond the barest minimum of required material. In addition, because teachers must constantly struggle simply to maintain order in an overcrowded classroom, the likelihood increases that they will suffer from burnout earlier than might otherwise be the case.

It is unquestionable that overcrowding has a direct and often severe impact on the logistics of the school day, forcing changes in schedules and making disruptions and noise part of normal operating procedure. For example, in order to accommodate all students, lunch periods must often begin as early as 9 a.m., and must extend far into the afternoon. Teachers cannot use a single room for the full day, but must transport their materials from classroom to classroom. There also may be too few lockers for the number of students, and, because they must navigate crowded hallways, students may require additional time to travel from class to class. Perhaps most seriously, electives such as art, music, and shop classes may have to be eliminated, because of the need to use all available space for educational "basics." Finally, administrators must devote their time and energies to maintaining order, rather than undertaking the more important work of leading efforts to improve their schools.

Strategies for Relieving Overcrowding

Increases in a school district's enrollment may come as a result of normal fluctuations in local birth rates, a one-time influx of new residents, or, more seriously, may be part of an ongoing trend. In cases where increases in school enrollment are expected to continue, the only guaranteed long-term means of relieving overcrowding is the expensive and time-consuming process of building new schools or of renovating and adding to existing schools, undertakings that can be nearly impossible in already underfinanced urban schools.

However, in cases where increases in enrollment may be temporary, or where stop-gap measures are needed while new schools are being built, there are a number of short-term solutions that districts may take to help relieve overcrowding. In general, these strategies fall into two broad categories: finding new space and using time to more fully utilize existing space.

Finding New Space

Leasing. Leasing provides a quick, cost-effective way of obtaining additional short-term space. Not only can spaces for leasing be identified and acquired in a fraction of the time needed to acquire similar spaces through new construction, but leasing can represent a significant per seat savings over the cost of construction. Further, leases can be negotiated with lease-purchase agreements, allowing districts to buy spaces at the end of the lease period if necessary.

Collaboratives. Local colleges and universities, businesses, and non-profit organizations may have spaces available for use, allowing students to receive instructional or non-instructional services in settings outside of traditional school buildings. Such arrangements can range from work-experience programs to courses offered in the evenings and weekends. By developing collaborations with such organizations, districts can not only find needed space for students, but can also enrich their educational offerings.

Relocating Administrative Space. In many cases, administrative offices may be located within schools. Moving them to a centralized location can free up space for instructional use.

District-Wide Redistribution of Space. New York City districts are atypical in the degree to which they offer students the option of attending a school outside of their own neighborhood; thus, the Commission's recommendations for school redistricting and rezoning may have only limited relevance for other urban districts as they now operate. However, these other districts may also be able to redefine the legal and geographical boundaries that determine which students attend particular schools. In most overcrowded districts, it is likely that certain schools are significantly overutilized, while others house fewer students than their space could allow. By shifting district or zoning boundaries, building utilization can be equalized across the district, thus relieving some of the burden on overcrowded schools and making more efficient use of under-enrolled schools.

In addition, districts with magnet and special school programs that draw students from across the district can place these programs in underutilized schools, thus better distributing students within available space.

Using Time to More Fully Utilize Existing Space

There are two fundamental methods of using time in order to ease the burdens caused by school overcrowding: extended day programs and year-round education.

Extended Day Programs. Schools can increase their capacity by beginning the school day earlier and ending it later, and by having students attend in shifts. In the most extreme version of such extended day programs, half of a school's students attend only in the morning, while the other half attend only in the afternoon, thus doubling the number of students taught in a single space during the day. Other types of extended day programs might comprise overlapping shifts.

However, there is some evidence that split shifts negatively affect not only student achievement, but also—and more radically—school climate. Thus they tend to be used only as a last-chance option for relieving overcrowding.

Year-Round Education. By changing from a nine-month to a twelve-month calendar, schools can accommodate more students in existing buildings. With this strategy, all students attend school for the same number of days—180—every year, but take several short vacations rather than a single three-month-long summer break. Most programs divide students into three or four "streams"; while one group is on vacation, another uses the vacationing group's classroom space.

While year-round education relieves overcrowding and has some educational benefits (such as increasing students' retention of what they have learned), it also has some drawbacks: parents may resist changes in the traditional school year; school maintenance and student transportation costs may increase; and, in warmer climates, schools may have to be fitted with air conditioning for summer classes, which may be prohibitively costly.

Conclusion: A Student Space "Bill of Rights"

Providing adequate spaces for education is not simply a matter of ensuring a certain number of square feet of classroom space per student. For learning to truly take place, students must have access to spaces appropriate for the purposes to which they are being used. Among other things, this means that classes should be held in rooms meant for instruction, not in makeshift spaces such as closets and hallways; science classes should be held in laboratories designed to support hands-on learning; and classrooms for the arts, the trades, and technology should be equally appropriately equipped. Schools should be able to provide quiet and safe places for individual testing and private counseling, as well as suitable common areas such as libraries, gyms, and playgrounds. School facilities should be properly maintained and functional, and all areas should be accessible to people with disabilities.

All too often such space configurations are not recognized as fundamental educational necessities. However, if schools are to fulfill their education mission, adequate spaces for learning must be provided. This is especially true in urban areas, where students may not have access to a safe and orderly environment outside school walls.

— Gary Burnett

This digest is based on two reports. One, *Bursting at the Seams: Report of the Citizens' Commission on Planning for Enrollment Growth*, by Ricardo R. Fernandez and P. Michael Timpane, Chairmen, is available from the Office of the Chancellor, New York City Board of Education, 110 Livingston Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201. The other, *A School System at Risk: A Study of the Consequences of Overcrowding in New York City Public Schools*, by Francisco L. Rivera-Batiz and Lillian Marti, is available from the Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 75, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027. Both publications are also contained in the ERIC microfiche collection.

ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (800) 601-4868. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

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